

Innovation in art lies in TV screen

By RUSSELL LEE KAHN

Images flash across a television monitor. Red and blue ovals spin slowly as sounds echo in the background.

A psychedelic experience? No, the images are really on the TV screen, and they are being created right there, too, in Ralph Hocking's work studio in Weltonville, north of Owego.

Hocking is a film instructor at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He is on a one-year sabbatical from the school and is working in the new medium of television art. Mork and Mindy are not the only forms possible on your screen these days.

"Television has enormous potential," he said from his director's chair overlooking an artificial pond near his house. "Right now it has some good moments, but basically it's a five-plot universe, and worst of all, it's a one-way medium."

Hocking sees television as a possible two-way tool for such things as voting, virtually "doing away with the need for a legislature."

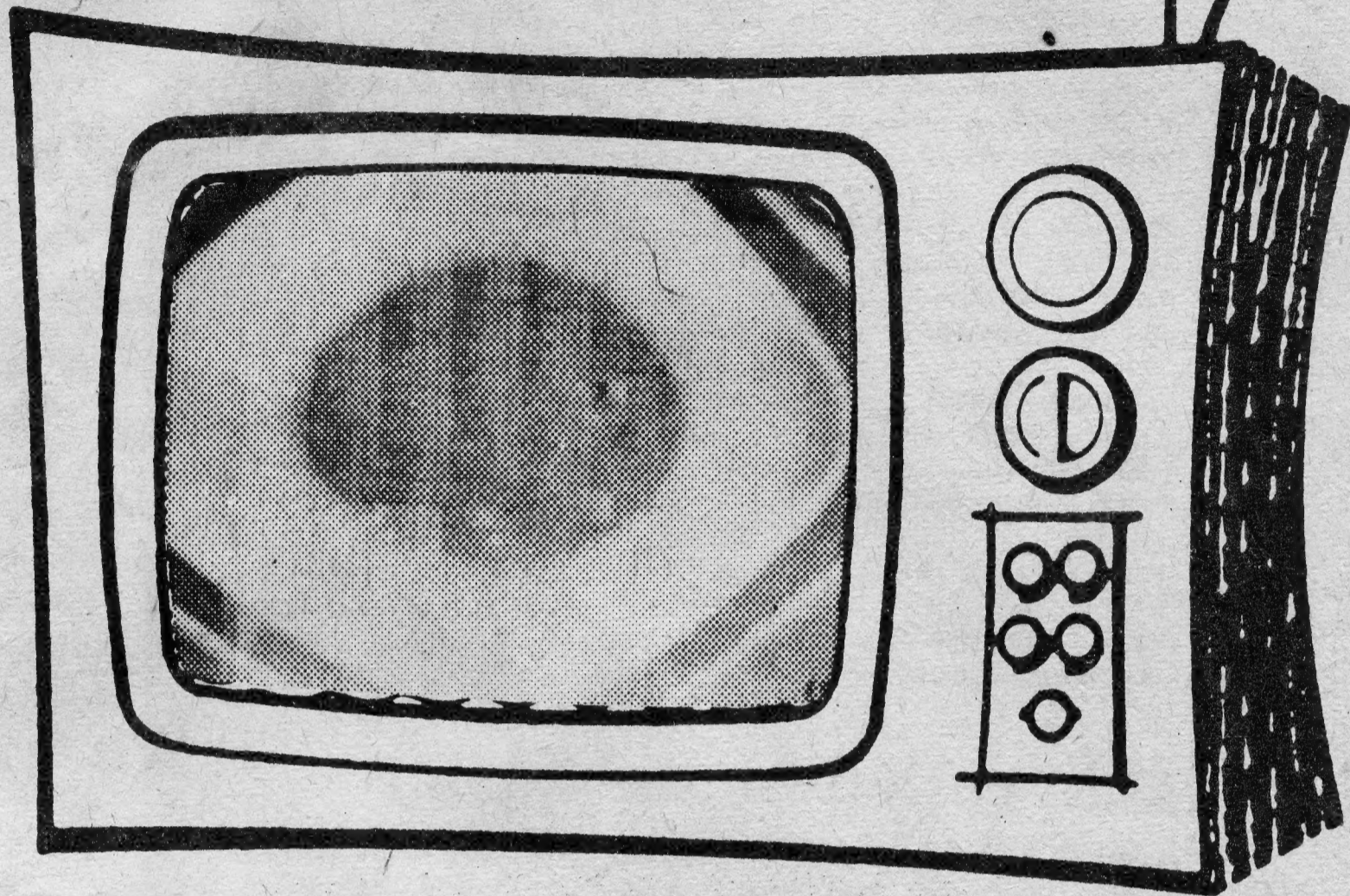
But for now, Hocking is content to use his roomful of equipment to explore the potential of television as an art form. He will bring his ideas to the Owego area this summer as he moves the Experimental Television Center he owns and operates to Owego. For the last 10 years, the center has been at 165 Court St., Binghamton, but its new home will be on Owego's Riverow.

Hocking plans five-week workshops at the center to teach the new art form.

"TV is very new. Right now it's like 'Reader's Digest' when we could have the New York Times," Hocking said.

Sherry Miller, the center's administrator, looked up from where she sat on a ledge overlooking the pool. She said even public television had lost much of its innovation in its desire to be accepted by large audiences, but she added that recent criticism could change that.

Hocking said he was not out to entertain with the video art medium, but rather "to provoke, to get the thought cells firing in the brain." He later conceded some of the visually colorful and sparkling images he creates on the screen may be entertaining, but such an effect is secondary.



Images like this may be new TV art forms

When he sits down to watch commercial TV, it is to "let images run in front of me and to allow me to forget myself," he said, but in his work "it is not my intention to amuse or divert, but to engage and provoke."

He hesitated, and added, "I don't think things should be candy-coated."

Hocking inserted into a videotape machine a cassette he has prepared for an exhibition this fall at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The screen showed Miller sitting in an egg-like position as ovals revolved around her. Then the ovals began to disintegrate in time with electronic music.

"All this was done live," Hocking said. "Sherry could see what was being done with her image on the screen and react to it" as Hocking operated a computer.

An important part of his visual art form, he said, is that it makes use of the whole rainbow of colors, although television most often uses only colors we are used to seeing in everyday life.

"TV producers think in terms of 28 minutes," and can't deal in five-minute segments as he often does, Hocking said.

Miller, who has worked full time at the center for five years, said she thought it would just be a matter of time before television was fully accepted as an art form.

"Since 1900, technology is becoming more and more accepted as an art form. When it first came out, photography was just used as a documentary tool. Now it is accepted as art. I think the same thing can happen with television if it is used correctly."

Hocking received a bachelor's degree in pottery and art education at Michigan State University, but it wasn't until 1968 he became interested in video art.

He saw something strange on 57th Street in Manhattan. A man was waving magnets in front of color TV sets in a store window. He later learned it was a Korean, Nam June Paik, and he was using the magnets to bring out new colors on the television screens.

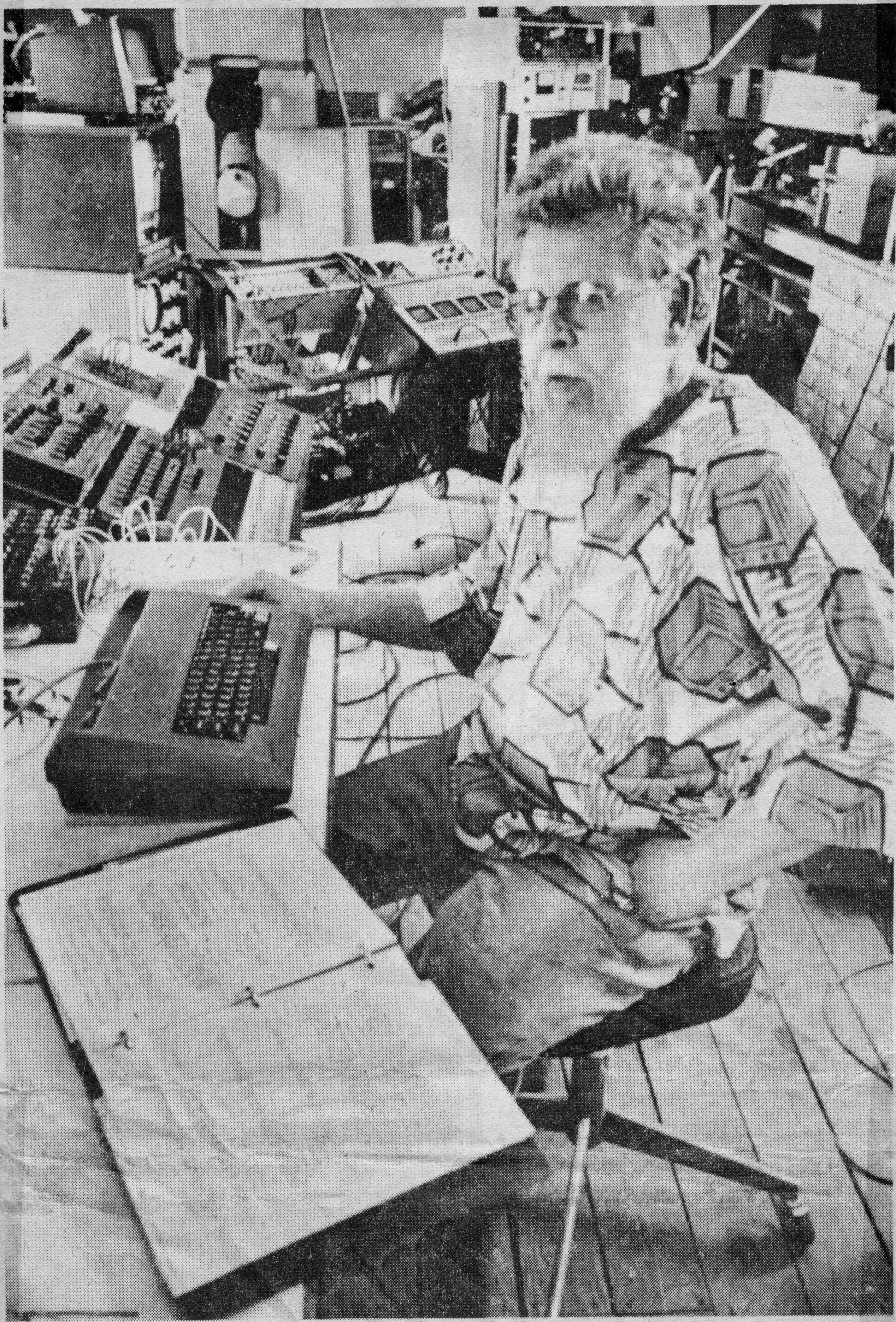
Paik was a pioneer in television art, and Hocking soon found himself experimenting with the technical possibilities of TV, "using devious ways to get the set to do different things."

In 1971, Hocking got his first grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to set up his Experimental Television Center. Last year he received a total of \$45,000 from the state council and from the National Endowment for the Arts to operate the center.

He is writing a book about his work, so "I won't have to continually defend what I'm doing."

Hocking said he doubts he will ever get rich with his visual experiments. He pointed to a rusting 1960s Cadillac he uses to get work, and told of the time when an old convertible he owned broke down while he was going up a hill. He and some friends pushed it the rest of the way and then coasted to the bottom of the hill where there happened to be a used-car lot. He bought an old Chevrolet and was on his way.

"I'm a survivor," he said. "I've learned how to live on leftovers."



JOHN BOLAS JR.

Ralph Hocking sits amid his playland of television equipment and videotape machines.